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From The Times

August 26, 2009

## Women with ovarian cancer 'dying because GPs fail to spot signs'

David Rose, Health Correspondent

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Women with ovarian cancer are dying because GPs are failing to detect the early signs of the disease, a study suggests today.

The disease, known as the "silent killer", is the fifth-most common cancer in women, with 6,800 new cases each year in Britain and 4,300 deaths. Many GPs believe that it has no obvious signs in the early stages.

Researchers writing in the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ) say that family doctors may be overlooking a main symptom because it is not included in the guidance for urgent investigation.

Women who report a distended abdomen need to be seen urgently for tests, they say. Yet the guidance says that women should be referred only if they experience abnormal bleeding or if they have a palpable mass that is not obviously fibroids (benign tumours).



Women with a distended abdomen must be seen urgently

Survival rates for ovarian cancer are above 70 per cent if it is

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Screening may be key to beating ovarian cancer

caught early, but only about one in three is given the diagnosis in the early stages.

The research, carried out by a team from the department of community-based medicine at the University of Bristol, involved 212 women, all aged over 40, from 39 general practices in Devon. They were compared with more than 1,000 healthy women acting as a

**MULTIMEDIA**

Graphic: the silent killer

control group.

The researchers found that many of the women had told their GP about their symptoms, with the most common being abdominal distension, pain, bloating and loss of appetite. But some women reporting distension, urinary frequency and pain waited at least six months before a diagnosis was made.

Willie Hamilton, the consultant senior lecturer who led the study, said: "Many of the symptoms described by women ... include fatigue, abdominal pain or subtle changes in urination or the bowels. With those, quite simply ovarian cancer doesn't spring to the GP's mind. Unquestionably, some women have their cancer missed and have to return, sometimes repeatedly.

"Ovarian cancer is not a 'silent killer' — it is just not being heard."

The study comes as figures also released today show that ovarian cancer rates are falling, which has been attributed to more women taking the Pill, which can protect against the disease.

The decreasing use of hormone replacement therapy could also be a factor in the drop of nearly 20 per cent in the cancer among women in their 50s and early 60s since 1998, [Cancer Research UK](#) said. Although the number of diagnosed cases has not changed significantly, the population has increased, leading to declining rates, the charity said.

Dr Hamilton added that fewer than 1 per cent of women with any of the symptoms in the guidance for urgent referral would have ovarian cancer. Yet, for abdominal distension, this figure was more than twice as high.

"A 2.5 per cent risk of ovarian cancer with abdominal distension clearly warrants investigation," the report says. "This symptom was also reported by over a third of women [with the cancer]."

Annwen Jones, the chief executive of [Target Ovarian Cancer](#), said that a recent study by the charity found that 80 per cent of GPs thought wrongly that women with early-stage disease had no symptoms.

Ovarian cancer can run in families, and more than 50 per cent of cases occur in women over the age of 65. But more than a third of women with cancer waited more than six months from first visiting their GP to getting their diagnosis, she added.

The five-year survival rate, at 30 per cent, is one of the lowest in the Western world.



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A spokesman for the [Department of Health](#) said: "We recognise that we need to improve awareness of the signs and symptoms of cancer among the public and GPs and that is why we launched the National Awareness and Early Diagnosis Initiative in November 2008. The *BMJ* study, which looks at cases of ovarian cancer diagnosed before the initiative was launched, supports the need for action."

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**A Williams wrote:**

I suspect that there are many diseases that GP's are failing to spot because, despite the huge increases in practice incomes under this administration, too much is being taken out in salaries and pension contributions with very little reinvested in up to date detection facilities or training.

I speak from recent, first hand experience whereby a local GP practice and NHS hospital took 8 months and a multiplicity of untargeted tests to diagnose a potentially fatal illness that, it turns out, should have been obvious from early results but was overlooked for 6 months.

Not me but my daughter, mother to 3 kids under 7.

August 26, 2009 12:48 AM BST

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